

Marketing

This ain't Greenpeace: A Quebec play reveals advertising's foibles and provides a tag line for the next referendum

Monday, January 1, 2001

A receptionist greets the audience members, oops, make that clients, at the entrance. She hands each one a presentation brief, rather than a program, and they sit in rolling office chairs arranged helter-skelter throughout the open set.

Welcome to Propagande, a play about the advertising industry written, directed and starring Stéphane E. Roy, a former advertising industry insider, which played at Montreal's Théâtre d'Aujourd'hui this fall. Roy, an ex-copywriter for Cossette Communication-Marketing in Montreal, calls his play "a sarcastic look at the world of advertising," an industry in which the only belief is satisfying the client.

With that in mind, it's not terribly surprising the play doesn't have too many nice things to say about its practitioners-or its clients.

The audience, which numbers no more than 50, squeezes into the offices of fictional agency VTFV (Va Te Faire Voir Communication), which have the ubiquitous trappings of many agencies: a spartan industrial look, a basketball net and funny-looking drinks. The cast is already hard at work when audience members/clients troop in to the sound of a pounding techno beat.

The drama of the play begins when agency president François Moreau tells Roy's character, creative director Sébastien Morin, that the agency has been chosen by the Liberal Party to create the "No" advertising campaign for an imaginary third referendum on Quebec sovereignty. Morin, who has been put in charge of creative, is shocked, given that he's been a card-carrying member of the Parti Québécois for the last 14 years.

"Canada, why do I hate that word?" harrumphes Morin. But the agency president convinces him with such phrases as "You're not in Greenpeace, you're in advertising." And so the grumbling sovereigntist accepts the ignominious task of selling federalism.

Meanwhile, in troops G. Pearson, director of sales, Eastern Canada for Can Food, just off the plane from Toronto. Pearson can't understand why the French campaign the agency created for his Silver Corn cereal can't just be a pure translation of the hilarious English version, which uses a Leonard Cohen song.

All this is supposed to show how brilliant Quebec creative often falls victim to the whims of the just-don't-get-it evil English from Toronto. Of course, the reality is that many Quebec campaigns are not mere translations. What's more, the Cohen example is a strange one, since the gravelly voiced "singer" is as popular in Quebec as he is in the rest of North America. And Mr. Pearson is depicted sympathetically as an English Canadian with a decent command of French, an improvement over much of the reality.

Back at the creative desk, Morin and his partner are working on the No campaign. Every few minutes, in a spoof of product placement, the actors pause and smile to the audience to show off the brands they're using- from "Tommy Figure" clothes to "Bel Mobilité" phones. Amusing at first, but tiring after a while-just like real ads.

Smoking pot in order to come up with a creative concept, they settle on a campaign with the slogan "Gardez les portes ouvertes" (Keep the doors open). Although Morin thinks the campaign stinks, the federalist clients love it. (Actually, come to think of it, this effort surpasses the No side's tepid campaign in the 1995 referendum.)

Minutes after that winning presentation, Morin is confronted by his ex-girlfriend, who's horrified he's working for the other side in the referendum. Meanwhile, his partner buys him out, noting that he can hire younger people at cheaper cost. And a voiceover explains that the No side has won again, with Quebecers deciding to keep the doors open.

By play's end, Morin, who believes advertising "is the art of telling people that they no longer know what they know," is scrawling the word Vendu" (sellout) on the blackboard to describe himself. In the finale, the cast comes out lip-syncing to the Pet Shop Boys' "Go West," while waving Canadian flags, and handing out paper Canadian flags to audience members/clients. This is supposed to be wildly amusing.

Propagande received decidedly mixed reviews. "It's not every day that an advertising agency creative-type opens his office doors to unveil to us the highs and (mainly) the lows of his field," a review in the cultural weekly *Voir* noted. But "if advertising is the art of the concise, Roy seems to have forgotten that lesson."

In the credits of the "presentation," Roy thanks his former *Cossette* colleague François Forget "for his moral long-distance support" and former *Cossette* boss Jacques Labelle.

He explains that writing plays, unlike advertising, "gives me the freedom to say what I want to say." Still, unless he wants to perform for himself in the shower, Roy has to sell his work-just like advertising agencies and their clients.